

Bush Administration Flouts Congressional Directives to Help Americans Sick From 9/11

Thursday, 08 May 2008

Washington, D.C. – Today, 10 bipartisan New York Members of Congress sharply rebuked a new report by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) on the status of the federal government's response to the health impacts of the 9/11 attacks. HHS's report, which was requested by Congress in the FY 2008 federal Labor-HHS appropriations bill, revealed that the Bush Administration has no plans to spend congressionally-approved funding to treat and monitor lower Manhattan residents, area workers, students and others who were exposed to the toxic aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. In addition, HHS failed to provide, again as requested by Congress, a "long-term, comprehensive federal plan for monitoring, screening, analysis and medical treatment for all individuals who were exposed to the toxins at the World Trade Center site."

Reps. Carolyn Maloney, Jerrold Nadler, Vito Fossella, Edolphus Towns, Eliot Engel, Charles Rangel, Gary Ackerman, Yvette Clarke, Nydia Velázquez, Steve Israel, and Anthony Weiner issued the following joint statement in response to HHS's report:

"We have a moral responsibility to help those whose lives were shattered by the terrorist attacks on our country. It was bad enough that the Administration fought our efforts to care for Americans who are sick from 9/11. Now they're ignoring Congressional orders to provide a comprehensive, long-term plan.

"Last year, Congress approved funding to treat and monitor area residents, workers, students and others who were exposed to Ground Zero toxins. All the administration needs to do is start spending this money, but as usual they're dragging their feet. Today, we're calling on the administration to get this money flowing and finally come up with a serious plan to address the 9/11 health crisis."

The lawmakers also expressed their concerns in a letter dated today to HHS Secretary Michael Leavitt, the text of which follows:

May 9, 2008

The Honorable Michael O. Leavitt

Secretary

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

200 Independence Avenue, S.W.

Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Secretary Leavitt,

We write to express our extreme dissatisfaction with your April 2008 report to Congress entitled "Providing Monitoring and Treatment Services for those Experiencing Injuries or Illness as a Result of the World Trade Center Exposures." As you know, this report is in response to the House Appropriations committee's request for a "long-term, comprehensive Federal plan for monitoring, screening, analysis and medical treatment for all

individuals who were exposed to the toxins at the World Trade Center site," contained in the Committee's report on the FY 2008 budget for the Department on Health and Human Services.

This report is simply not acceptable. It ignores both Congress's directions and the needs of those who are sick as a result of the WTC attacks.

First, the report takes credit for a list of accomplishments that the Department undertook only at the direction of Congress, even though the Administration opposed each step along the way. None of the advances in screening, monitoring, or treating responders were the initiatives of HHS, but rather showed HHS implementing these programs only in response to Congressional actions. Despite repeated requests by Congress, HHS has never produced a long term plan to address the medical needs of the responders, community residents, and students. The current report is only a one year plan, not the long term plan that we requested and need. Testimony at the most recent Appropriations Committee Hearing on the WTC medical programs documented the need for a long term plan and stable long term funding if these programs are going to adequately serve the medical needs of the responders and other groups.

Second, HHS continues what we believe are unconscionable stall tactics regarding care for residents, area workers, students, and others who have become sick from the attacks. On page 8 of this report under the heading "WTC Screening and Treatment Costs for Non-Responders," you state "At the time of this report to Congress, HHS is engaged in discussions and information-gathering to determine the extent of the need. As data becomes available, HHS will consider options for providing assistance and estimating costs. Within the resources appropriated in FY 2008, funds will be expended to support data gathering and further analysis." Public Law No. 110-161 specifically says that this funding shall be for "screening and treatment."

In the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2008, Congress, for the first time, provided funding for the monitoring and treatment of residents, area workers, students, and others who were exposed to the toxins of 9/11. Published, peer-reviewed studies have already reported adverse respiratory and mental health effects in this population, and the City of New York is currently spending millions of dollars to serve these individuals at a community program already in place at NYC Health and Hospitals Corporation's WTC Environmental Health Center. To date, no federal funding for these populations has been released, and this report appears to indicate that no funding will be released in FY 2008. This is unacceptable. We ask that you immediately release funding for non-responders, as required by Congress.

Third, this report is not a plan to move forward but rather a wait-and-see account of what HHS has done in the past. If the heroes and heroines of 9/11 had taken a similar wait-and-see approach to their rescue, recovery and clean-up work at Ground Zero, we would have been in dire straits. More than six years later, our brave responders are suffering as a result of their heroism, while HHS says they need no more funding and no legislation to care for their health and compensation needs. Sick residents, area workers, students, and others have simply been ignored.

Finally, we are disappointed that you have not been available to discuss these WTC health issues with the New York delegation. You declined an invitation to appear at a January 2008 hearing of the Oversight Subcommittee on Government Management, and did not even send a representative from HHS to appear on your behalf. You agreed to meet with the New York delegation at a February 2008 budget hearing before the Energy and Commerce Committee. However, after multiple attempts by Congressman Engel's office to schedule the meeting, we still find ourselves left without a time and date to meet with you, as you promised. We hope this will be the last time we must follow up on scheduling this meeting. We expect to hear from you soon.

Sincerely,

CAROLYN B. MALONEY

JERROLD NADLER

VITO FOSSELLA

EDOLPHUS TOWNS

ELIOT ENGEL

CHARLES B. RANGEL

GARY ACKERMAN

YVETTE CLARKE

NYDIA VELÁZQUEZ

STEVE ISRAEL

ANTHONY WEINER